

March 18, 2009

WASHINGTON, DC—On March 18, 2009, Congressman Joe Sestak (PA-07) announced his opposition to any plan that would force America's Veterans to use private health insurance to pay for treatment of service-related injuries or disabilities.

"America's Veterans have earned the full support of their nation," said Congressman Sestak. "Veterans and their families can be fully assured that I will oppose any plan that would bill wounded Veterans' private insurance for the care they receive. There is a sacred trust between a nation and its warriors, and I will always fight to ensure that this trust is never threatened, weakened, or broken."

Congressman Sestak signed onto a letter to President Obama urging him not to consider billing Veterans private insurance for service-related injury or disability:

Dear Mr. President,

We first want to take this opportunity to thank you for the clear commitment your administration's budget outline makes to our nation's veterans. The proposed 10 percent increase in discretionary funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for next fiscal year is truly historic. We believe the 2010 budget will ensure the VA never again faces the chronic under-funding that prevented countless veterans from receiving the health benefits they have earned.

While we strongly support your plans to increase funding for the VA by \$25 billion over the next five years, it is with equal conviction that we oppose the proposal to bill veterans' private health insurance plans for care and treatment of service-connected injuries or disabilities.

We do not give our veterans health care - they earn it – and it would be unacceptable for the VA to ask our veterans to pay for the treatment of injuries received while serving our nation in uniform. That responsibility belongs to the VA, and it would be wrong to outsource the responsibility of covering the care of those veterans to private insurance companies.

Additionally, this proposal could harm our veterans and their families in unintended, yet very serious ways, jeopardizing their families' health care and even negatively affecting veterans' employment opportunities. Billing a veteran's private health insurance for the treatment of service-connected injuries could lead to increased health care premiums, and could potentially discourage employers from hiring veterans.

We know you are committed to expanding employment opportunities for veterans. Already this

year, your administration and Congress have worked to create countless jobs for veterans returning from the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but this proposal would undermine our efforts. We urge you to take this proposal off the table, and let us instead focus on ensuring that our veterans receive the full care and benefits they have earned. The moral obligation our nation has to our veterans demands nothing less. We are happy to discuss these issues with you further as we move toward a final budget for the VA.

We would like to thank you again for your commitment to improving care for the men and women who have borne the battle, and who have sacrificed their health and well-being in serving their country. Thank you for your service to our nation.

Congressman Sestak did, however, applaud President Obama's support for Veterans and the VA in the Recovery Act and in the President's budget:

VETERANS PROVISIONS IN H.R. 1 AMERICAN RECOVERY AND REINVESTMENT ACT OF 2009

SUMMARY

Having passed a new GI Education bill and \$16.3 billion in new funding in 2007 and 2008 for veterans, the 2009 stimulus bill adds \$1.4 billion in additional funding to modernize our VA hospitals and \$2.98 billion to modernize DOD hospitals, barracks and day care centers.

DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS' AFFAIRS SPENDING PROVISIONS

Medical Facilities: \$1.0 billion for non-recurring maintenance, including energy projects, to address deficiencies and avoid serious maintenance problems at the 153 VA hospitals.

National Cemetery Administration: \$50 million for memorial maintenance, including those identified in the 2002 Millennium Act report to Congress, for the National Cemetery Administration. These funds will enable the National Cemetery Administration to work toward an established set of cemetery standards of appearance throughout the system.

Claims Processors: \$150 million for a temporary increase in claims processing staff.

Information Technology Systems: \$50 million to improve automation of benefits processing.

State Extended Care Facilities: \$150 million for grants to States for extended care facilities.

Tax Relief: \$250 for disabled veterans.

VETERANS PROVISIONS IN THE PRESIDENT'S BUDGET

Funding Highlights:

- Increases funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs by \$25 billion above baseline over the next five years.
- Dramatically increases funding for veterans health care.
- Expands eligibility for veterans health care to over 500,000 veterans by 2013.
- Enhances outreach and services related to mental health care and cognitive injuries, including post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury, with a focus on access for veterans in rural areas.
- Invests in better technology to deliver services and benefits to veterans with the quality and efficiency they deserve.
- Provides greater benefits to veterans who are medically retired from service.
- Combats homelessness by safeguarding vulnerable veterans.
- Facilitates timely implementation of the comprehensive education benefits that veterans earn through their dedicated military service.

Increases Funding for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) by \$25 Billion Above Baseline Over the Next Five Years. The President's Budget takes the first step toward increasing funding for VA by \$25 billion over the next five years in order to honor our Nation's veterans and expand the services they receive.

Dramatically Increases Funding for VA Health Care. This increase will provide adequate resources to give 5.5 million veteran patients timely and high quality care. This funding also enables VA to create Centers of Excellence and provides additional veteran-oriented specialty care in areas including prosthetics, vision and spinal cord injury, aging, and women's health.

Restores Health Care Eligibility for Modest-income veterans. For the first time since January 2003, the President's Budget expands eligibility for VA health care to nondisabled veterans earning modest incomes. This expansion will bring over 500,000 eligible veterans into the VA health care system by 2013 while maintaining high quality and timely care for the lower-income and disabled veterans who currently rely on VA medical care.

Enhances Outreach and Services Related to Mental health Care and Cognitive injuries with a focus on Access for veterans in Rural Areas. Conditions such as post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury present challenges in caring for veterans of current conflicts. The President's Budget expands the mental health screening and treatment services offered by VA and focuses on reaching veterans in rural areas. VA will increase the number of Vet Centers and mobile health clinics to expand access to mental health screening and treatment in rural areas. In addition, new funding will help veterans and their families stay informed of these resources and encourage them to pursue needed care.

Invests in Better Technology to Deliver Services and Benefits to Veterans with the Quality and Efficiency they deserve. To transform VA into a 21st Century organization, the President's Budget invests in information technology that directly benefits veterans in the areas of both health care and benefits. Through improved electronic medical records, VA will more efficiently retrieve active duty health records from the Department of Defense and enable all VA care sites to access the records of veterans needing care. VA will also invest in the development of rules-based electronic processes to increase accuracy, consistency, and timeliness in veterans'

receipt of benefits.

Provides Greater Benefits for veterans Who Are Medically Retired from Service.

For the first time, highly disabled veterans who are medically retired from service will be eligible for concurrent receipt of disability benefits from VA in addition to Department of Defense retirement benefits.

Combats homelessness by Safeguarding vulnerable veterans. The President's Budget expands VA's current services to homeless veterans through a collaborative pilot program with non-profit organizations. This pilot will help maintain stable housing for veterans who are at risk of falling into homelessness while helping VA to continue providing them with supportive services.

Facilitates Timely implementation of the Comprehensive Education Benefits Veterans Earn Through Their dedicated Service. The Budget provides the resources for effective implementation of the post-9/11 GI Bill—providing unprecedented levels of educational support to the men and women who have served our country through active military duty.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.